

## Workplace Bully May Soon Get Busted

By Holly Culhane, Contributing Columnist



We recoil with horror when we hear stories about school yard bullies who drive their teenage victims to suicide. The recent death of a bullied Tehachapi student has attracted national attention. It is one in a series of tragedies that have occurred across the nation that has focused concerns on what seems to be a bullying epidemic.

In a recent comprehensive *Bakersfield Californian* story, Wayne Sakamoto noted that “we have gone away from a culture of respect and kindness.” Teaching basic etiquette is no longer a priority. The Southern California school official and safety expert explained we now have “a meaner, tougher youth culture.”

But the bullying epidemic is not confined to the school yard. Where do bullies go when they grow up? Right into the workplace.... and they often become an obnoxious coworker, or worse, “the boss.”

Human resources professionals recognize the days of ignoring workplace bullying are past. There is increasing evidence – including court rulings and the awarding of damages – that the response to workplace bullying may be where sexual harassment was 15 years ago.

High profile cases, with sympathetic judges and juries, eventually resulted in federal and state laws being passed to protect workers from sexual harassment. It’s just a matter of time until workplace bullying receives similar attention.

A 2007 Zogby poll revealed 37 percent of American adults said they had been bullied at work. Workers who are abused based on their membership in a “protected class” – race, nationality, religion, etc. – can sue under civil rights statutes. But the laws are vague as to “general meanness” – the garden-variety bullying that is all too common in the workplace.

Likely that will soon change. Look no further than New York, where this summer both Republicans and Democrats in the state Senate overwhelmingly passed a bill that will let workers sue for physical, psychological or economic harm due to abusive treatment on the job. The Assembly is expected to consider New York’s Healthy Workplace Bill next year. Some Scandinavian countries already have enacted workplace protections against bullying.

Many people reading this article may have experienced some degree of workplace bullying at one time or another. Although no precise legal definition of bullying exists, efforts have been made to begin to describe the unwanted conduct. For example, you can find a diagnostic quiz at [www.psychcentral.com](http://www.psychcentral.com), by searching for “workplace bullying quiz.”

The bad economy may be increasing workplace bullying as a problem. When the economy was booming and jobs plentiful, workers could jump to another job, rather than endure a bully boss or coworker. But with unemployment in Kern County in the double digits, jobs are few and far between. Workers may feel “stuck.”

The problem with this is people quit and stay. In other words, they check out emotionally, but physically remain at the job. The void that is left negatively affects teamwork, morale and ultimately a company’s profitability.

A few years ago, I encountered the “classic” bully boss. Employees at a local company told me about their boss who would systematically focus abuse on selected subordinates. This person would yell, belittle, set unrealistic expectations, impose unscheduled overtime, publicly humiliate, gossip, sabotage projects, and exclude out-of-favor workers from social events.

The workers knew they eventually would become this person’s victim. Their coping strategy was simple: When the focus turned their way, suffer in silence. The less resistance given, the sooner the focus would shift.

After years of this reign of terror, the boss was fired – not because of bullying, but because he also sexually harassed a subordinate. Meanwhile, the workplace under this bully boss lost productivity and the company’s profits suffered...which doesn’t even take into account the hardship suffered by employees who endured this individual.

Bullying behavior may be hard to define and detect. There are cases of obvious abusive behavior, but most abusive behavior is subtle and sneaky. However manifested, workplace bullying can be costly, resulting in lost wages, medical expenses and, if proven in court, compensation for damages.

In a 2007 report, “How to Bust the Office Bully,” Sarah Tracy, director of the Project for Wellness and Work-Life at Arizona State University, suggested several tactics for abused workers:

- Be rational – Victims who express events in a linear fashion are more likely to be taken seriously. Write out your “story,” highlighting three to five episodes.
- Be relevant – Keep focused on the bully’s behavior. Do not make it personal.
- Provide consistent and specific details – Document incidents. Keep a journal.
- Offer a plausible story – Use familiar descriptions. Don’t focus exclusively on one outrageous example.
- When you are ready to present your case, make certain to do so without unnecessary emotion.

Companies should be proactive and establish a zero tolerance policy for inappropriate behavior. And reports of such behavior should be addressed immediately. Companies should also root out abusive employees and provide a protected mechanism for workers to express concerns, like an ombudsman program or an employee hot line.

No doubt, laws prohibiting workplace bullying loom on the horizon. Companies would be well-advised to take the initiative and not wait for their passage.

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